

Margins That Haunt: Silence, Delusion, and Gendered Exclusion in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Gravel Heart* and *Paradise*

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Abstract

This article examines how Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Gravel Heart* and *Paradise* depict silence as both a symptom and a structure of exclusion. By focusing on marginalised figures, namely Masud and the Mistress, it analyses how gendered, political, and narrative silences function in the novels. Drawing on Spivak's notion of subalternity and the centre-periphery dynamics advanced by Hauthal and Toivanen (2021), this article attests to how Gurnah embeds marginality in the structure of his novels. Masud and the Mistress are not only excluded by society but also by the novels themselves. They are discussed, refracted through others, and allowed to speak only when it is too late or through a distorted translation by another character. By placing these silenced characters at the emotional centre, yet structural margin of his narratives, Gurnah exposes how exclusion is not merely represented in postcolonial fiction but also enacted.

Keywords:

Gurnah, Silence, Margin, Postcolonial, Exclusion, Emasculation

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Introduction

Abdulrazak Gurnah's novels are shaped by what is said just as much as what is left unsaid. The memories and traumas that characters are unable to articulate, which shape their day-to-day reality, are linked to the historical trauma inflicted on the African continent and its aftermath. In *Gravel Heart* (2017) and *Paradise* (1994), silence is depicted as both a symptom and a result of political and social betrayal, as well as of emotional fracture. Masud and the Mistress inhabit this silence as individuals excluded from society; however, despite their silencing, their presence is felt as dense and weighty. Masud retreats into silence and self-exile in *Gravel Heart* because of his emasculation at the hands of those in



power. His silence is a tool of survival, the only thing he can control in a society where his economic, social and masculine identities have been stripped away. The Mistress in *Paradise* exists on the margins and is silent because of her physical disfigurement and refusal to conform to prescribed gender roles, marking her as deviant. She is confined within the walls of mirrors and rumours. Her longing for freedom, physically and psychologically, is framed as madness. Not only does Gurnah deny the characters a voice, but the narrative structure itself also reflects their marginalisation. Both Masud and the Mistress remain on the periphery of the respective novels. They do not drive the plot; they haunt it. Masud is told of through the memories and perspective of his son Salim, while the Mistress is spoken of by others, mainly Khalif and Yusuf, and when she does speak, her words are translated by Khalif or Amina, who distort what she says.

The dual silencing – of speech and narrative authority – reflects Gurnah’s preoccupation with those excluded from mainstream society and forced to live on the periphery. By focusing on Masud and the Mistress, this article argues that Gurnah enacts exclusion formally rather than merely describes it. Silence in both novels is not incidental but deliberate. It becomes a response to grief that cannot be voiced, trauma that remains unresolved, and the failure to conform to strict social norms, especially gendered ones. At the same time, it is a refusal to conform and to endure even when silenced. To frame this analysis, the article draws on Gayatri Spivak’s theory of subalternity, particularly her claim that “the subaltern cannot speak,” to examine how speech is not only denied but overwritten and refracted through dominant voices. Spivak’s (1988) differentiation between *Vetreten* and *Darstellen* is important in understanding how the characters are denied narrative agency. Their voices are filtered through others’, replacing them rather than allowing them to speak for themselves, illustrating what Spivak identifies as the silencing mechanism of those on the periphery. However, the novels concurrently challenge the stability of the centre-periphery dichotomy by positioning characters at the structural margins of the narrative while locating them at its emotional centre, thereby suggesting a form of peripherality that is fluid, relational, and inherently unstable rather than fixed or absolute.

Through close readings of Masud and the Mistress in *Gravel Heart* and *Paradise*, respectively, this article explores how emasculation and

marginalisation are not only presented in the narratives but also embedded in the texts' structures, reinforcing the emotional weight of exclusion. It examines how Abdulrazak Gurnah constructs silence as both a narrative technique and a thematic concern, portraying the psychological and social marginalisation of characters excluded by political, economic and cultural dynamics. Masud and the Mistress represent non-hegemonic spaces of identity. In doing so, it shows that emasculation and erasure are not merely depicted; they are embedded in the very fabric of the novels.

Theoretical Framework

This article employs postcolonial theory, specifically Spivak's (1988) concept of subalternity and centre-periphery dynamics, to explore the silences of gender, class, and narrative in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Gravel Heart* and *Paradise*. These theoretical frameworks guide a close reading of the narrative structure, the positioning of characters, and moments of silence or delayed speech in the novels, enabling the analysis to trace how silence is produced within the text rather than represented. The marginal position of Masud and the Mistress is therefore not only a reflection of exclusion within the novels but also indicative of the broader social, political, economic and cultural structures that produce and sustain marginality. In doing so, the article examines how narrative form itself participates in the production of marginality, foregrounding the mechanisms through which silence is sustained rather than merely thematically depicted.

Hauthal and Toivanen's (2021) "European peripheries in the postcolonial literary imagination" helps in understanding how spatial and symbolic configurations of power function in postcolonial settings. They argue that "traditionally, the 'centre' is associated with power, hegemony, vitality, and progress; the notion of the periphery, by contrast, resonates with such negative qualifiers as backwardness, stagnation, lack of vitality, exploitation, and oppression" (Hauthal & Toivanen 2021, p. 292). In *Gravel Heart* and *Paradise*, the centre - depicted as patriarchal state power, normative gender roles, or narrative authority - dominates the space of voice. At the same time, the periphery is occupied by silence and distortion.

However, the relationship between the centre and periphery is not one of pure opposition, even as "power imbalance" persists (ibid.). The Mistress, for instance, is not entirely outside the centre; her wealth and former beauty

had once granted her social capital. Likewise, Masud had a respectable job and was educated. However, both are displaced by historical and gendered shifts in power and pushed to the margins. This fluidity suggests that marginality operates as a shifting positionality rather than a stable identity, allowing characters to occupy moments of proximity to power even as they remain structurally excluded. In this way, they reflect how postcolonial societies replicate colonial hierarchies, in which their presence is required to sustain the status quo while their voices are denied.

Gayatri Spivak's (1988) "Can the Subaltern Speak?" offers deeper insight into the complex relationship between power and ideology that renders some voices silent. She writes: "Let us now move to consider the margins (one can just as well say the silent, silenced centre) of the circuit marked out by this epistemic violence, men and women among the illiterate peasantry, the tribals, the lowest strata of the urban subproletariat" (Spivak 1988, p.78). The notion of the "silent, silenced centre" is vital as it challenges the binary between centre and margin, suggesting instead that a politics of silencing maintain the centre. In Gurnah's novels, Masud and the Mistress are central to the texts, but they remain structurally voiceless, reflecting Spivak's "silent, silenced centre."

Spivak also differentiates between *Vertreten* (representation as political proxy) and *Darstellen* (representation as narrative or aesthetic representation). She argues that when theorists assume the oppressed can speak for themselves, they ignore how language, ideology, and narrative structure frame and distort that speech. In *Paradise*, the Mistress speaks only through others - Khalil, Amina, Yusuf - all of whom offer filtered or sensationalised versions of her words. Even when her direct speech appears, it is refracted through translation, hearsay, or mockery. Similarly, in *Gravel Heart*, Masud's silence is broken only at the very end, and even then, it is too late to transform the father-son relationship. Both characters are subjected to what Spivak calls the "epistemic violence" - the way subaltern knowledge and agency are overwritten and silenced.

The ideas in this framework help explain Gurnah's deliberate narrative choices. In both *Gravel Heart* and *Paradise*, the novels' structures reflect the marginalisation of characters such as Masud and the Mistress - not only thematically but also formally. Their stories are told through the eyes of others, Yusuf and Salim, and even when they speak, their words are

filtered, translated, or come too late. What they feel or want is always mediated, sometimes distorted. Their voices are delayed, displaced, or overwritten. This is not accidental. It mirrors exactly the kind of structural silencing Spivak and Hauthal & Toivanen describe—how power, whether political, gendered, or class-based, shapes not only who gets to speak, but how they are spoken about.

In that sense, peripherality in Gurnah's novels is not just about content—it is embedded in the form. As Hauthal and Toivanen (2021) put it, "peripherality can be seen as a form of marginality that defines the construction of the identity of non-hegemonic cultural, economic, and geopolitical spaces" (p. 292). Masud and the Mistress inhabit that space—they are pushed aside politically and socially, but also textually. Their marginality becomes part of the narrative structure itself. Even when they do speak, their speech doesn't land, doesn't shift the plot, doesn't offer transformation. This reading brings Spivak's notion of subalternity into dialogue with centre-periphery dynamics to show how Gurnah's narrative strategies expose the mechanisms through which marginal figures remain structurally necessary yet discursively constrained. By tracing how silence operates at both thematic and formal levels, the article argues that peripherality is not simply represented but actively produced through narrative mediation. This brings to mind Spivak's point that the subaltern "cannot speak"—or rather, cannot be heard in a way that disrupts the system that silences them in the first place.

Emasculation and the Politics of Silence in *Gravel Heart*

Gravel Heart is told through the eyes of Salim, growing up in post-independent Zanzibar. Salim's father, Masud, leaves the home and becomes a hermit, avoiding contact and conversation even with his son, as he is not able to cope with his wife's forced infidelity, his wife becoming a concubine/second wife of a government minister to save her brother. It is only later, after the death of Salim's mother, Saida, upon his return from the UK, that the father opens up about his self-confinement, shortly before passing away. The title sets the scene for the novel. *Gravel Heart* signifies the condition of being reduced to fragments, with Masud reduced to a fragment of himself by dominant narratives, in which silence becomes both an imposed exclusion and an internalised survival strategy.

This section explores the impact of economic disparity and political manipulation/abuse of power/revolutionary politics on the fragility of masculinity, leading to a failed gender identity and self-imposed exclusion of Masud.

As Boparai (2021) rightly asserts, “Gurnah, in *Gravel Heart*, chalks out the lives of various characters vis-à-vis the dimensions of their class differences” (p. 7). Right from the beginning of the novel, the relationship between Salim and his father is fractured and fragile. While he has memories of better times, the silence has already taken hold of the household, and his earliest memories are of “an icy silence” (Gurnah, 2017, p. 3). Salim understands that a father’s role as the head of the family entails unexplainable responsibilities, which, in turn, make it difficult for a father to provide love and nurture as a mother does:

Also, fathers, just like everyone else, have to deal with the relentless manner in which life conducts its business, and they have their own tremulous selves to salve and sustain, and there must be many times when they hardly have enough strength for that, let alone love to spare for the child (Gurnah 2017, p. 3).

The relationship between Salim and his father is marked by emotional absence, with only fleeting memories of better times to fill the void. Growing up in such a home, Salim understands at an early age the cost that societal expectations exact on the male/father figure, stripping him of his ability to form emotional attachments with his family/children as he is too busy providing for them economically.

When his father finally leaves the house, the father-son relationship breaks down completely. He becomes ashamed of his father, already understanding at an early age that his masculinity is tainted. As Silberschmidt (2005) posits, “a man’s honour, his reputation, his ego, and his masculinity are severely affected if he cannot control his wife” (p. 196). He observes that his father has lost control over his wife and household. Indeed, as the narrator explicates:

I thought my father was a spineless and defeated man who had allowed himself to be humiliated into silence and craziness, that he had lost his mind or had lost his nerve, and thought I had an idea why he had turned out like that although no one had told me. I

thought my father was shameful, the owner of a shameful, useless body, and had shamed himself as well as me (Gurnah 2017, p.40).

In fact, he perceives his father's reaction as delusional. Instead of acting as a man should, he sinks into silence and craziness. Salim's misrecognition of his father's trauma is a direct result of the silence imposed by masculinity. Men are supposed to suffer in silence. However, the father's trauma is to such an extent that he is "no longer able to function according to his developed self-concept. He became psychologically bereft and awash in a sea of shifting identity. If he could no longer function as a man, then how should he function and, more importantly, what was he? So intense was this psychological shift as to induce deep depression and psychosis" (Walker 2f). Although Walker was referring to enslaved people being carried across the Atlantic during the slave trade, the emotional and psychological consequences she describes echo the postcolonial condition of men like Masud. Stripped of his job, his wife and social respectability, Masud is reduced to a shadow of himself, barely alive and filled with shame and a sense of worthlessness. Being unable to provide for and maintain control over his family renders him incompetent, even in his own son's eyes. Salim only sees the outer disintegration of his father, the 'useless body.'

The internal disintegration remains unspoken until after the death of Salim's mother, confined under the cultural expectations of male stoicism. Within hegemonic masculine expectations, silence becomes both a performance of endurance and a symptom of emotional dispossession, complicating the question of whether Masud's withdrawal represents resistance, survival, or internalised defeat. In an actual sense, Masud's self-imposed silence and exile are the only way he can preserve even a small sense of dignity within a society that has emasculated him politically, economically and domestically. This internal disintegration and narrative delay mirror what Spivak (1988) refers to as the "epistemic violence" that silences the subaltern. Masud's story is withheld until the very end, not because it is unknown, but because it cannot be heard or recognised until it is too late. His speech, like that of Spivak's silenced centre, comes only through displacement and death. The narrative focalisation through Salim—who misunderstands his father for most of the novel—further illustrates Spivak's (1988) concept of *Darstellen* versus *Vertreten*: Masud is not allowed to represent himself; he is represented, interpreted, and misread. His subjectivity is not only fractured within himself but also refracted through the lens of another.

Masud's retreat into silence and madness is a result of political manipulation and the lack of financial power to counter it. Hakim, the Vice President's son and Chief Protocol Officer, demands that Saida become his concubine if she wants her brother, Amir, released from prison. Amir is accused of having raped Hakim's sister. Being the brother, Hakim's masculinity is also challenged as he was unable to protect his sister from being sexually active before marriage, thus tainting the family name. To avoid shame, accusations of rape are fabricated. The only solution Hakim sees is his imposition of power over Masud's wife, the sister of Amir:

"Only you can save him," said Hakim. "You are a very beautiful woman. When you came in the door a moment ago, I felt my blood rush to my chest with eagerness. I have not felt like that for a woman before, never in my life. I mean for you to be clear what I am saying, plainly understand that I want you. I want to remove that mtandio veil and undress you and take full command of your body. I want you to yield your body to me. I want to take charge of it and do with it as I wish. I thirst with desire for you. I will not hard you or cause you pain, do you understand? I want to make love to you, not just once, but to my satisfaction. That is how much I want you. In return, I will release your brother" (Gurnah 2017, p. 240).

Hakim's demands reveal the misuse of power, both as a man and as a politician. He objectifies Saida and completely disregards her autonomy. To him, she is just an object of desire. Concurrently, the barter trade of her body in exchange for her brother is an abuse of his power. It is a direct continuation of the emasculating effects of colonialism, carried over into the postcolonial consciousness. The divide is no longer racial but rather among men of lower socioeconomic status. Hakim was well aware that Masud could not object or challenge the demands he made on Saida. His social standing as the son of the Vice President and Chief Protocol Officer, with access to the state machinery, placed him in a higher class than Masud, who, in this case, represents the subaltern class of post-revolutionary Zanzibar. Although Masud was educated and had a job, he was unable to do anything against Hakim's demands. This shows the new versions of colonialism in the postcolonial society, which use class and privilege to repress the lower classes. He emasculates and silences Masud, disempowering him as a man and as a husband, thereby emblematic of how power operates in postcolonial spaces and mirrors the colonial condition. The postcolonial

leaders, once imagined as liberators, have become the new tyrants, continuing the cycle of abuse and repression.

Hakim, by making this demand, places both Saida and Masud under duress. By forcing Saida into this relationship, he violates her body and autonomy. At the same time, her husband, Masud, is made to bear the consequences of this violation, as a husband and as a man who is unable to prevent it, hence castrating him emotionally and domestically. His role as a provider for his family and one who can protect his wife is dismantled. Masud watches as a silent bystander while his dignity as a man is erased.

I did not know what to do. I never knew what to do at any important moment in my life. I was always inept. I did not know how to speak to Saida about what she was doing. I was overwhelmed by what she was doing. I did not know why she was doing it anymore (Gurnah 2017, p. 245).

Masud's inability to act and lack of resources to draw from cement the fracturing of his family and are symbolic of a history in which colonised men were unable to reclaim power and control over their households and families. Masud's experience may also be understood through theories of hegemonic masculinity, particularly Connell's argument that masculine identity is structured around authority, provision, and control. Within such frameworks, masculinity is not merely personal but socially regulated, and failure to fulfil these expectations produces exclusion rather than sympathy. Masud, unable to safeguard the woman he is socially mandated to protect, is reduced to silence, shame and quasi-death. The only way he can grieve is through a self-imposed exile. As Fazili (2016) argues, grief can be understood "as disruption of an individual's or group's meaningful relationship to the world as a result of traumatic loss" (p. 54). Masud, in *Gravel Heart*, loses his wife, his role as a father, his authority as a husband, and his dignity as a man.

However, the society in which he lives dictates the terms of his mourning. Fazili (2016) rightly states that "the social structure imposes itself decisively on how the grieving subjects are allowed to mourn" (p. 54). Masculinity, especially in this postcolonial context, does not allow men to weep and grieve openly. Instead, the society silences the pain, driving it inward, leading it to manifest as delusion and dissociation from society. Masud is hence unable to grieve publicly without jeopardising the little sense of

manhood that he still has. Instead, he withdraws into himself, awaiting death:

At a certain age, you don't understand how long life is. You think it's all over for you, but it's not, not for a long time. You just don't understand how little strength the body needs to keep on living, how it goes on doing so despite you (Gurnah 2017, p. 248).

Masud serves as a symbol for a broader postcolonial masculine crisis. The novel interrogates how he is trapped within multiple structures of domination: state power, patriarchy and class oppression. These concurrently render him incapable of action, even of speech. The silence, in turn, alienates him from society and from his own son. Masud cannot explain himself to Salim without violating the hegemonic masculinity's code of stoicism. The false promises of liberation are revealed as delusional, postcolonial men betrayed once more by those they thought would free them. Masud, hence, resorts to silence and delusion as a survival mechanism, a way to endure his social and domestic emasculation. He excludes himself from society before society can do it for him. His marginality, then, is both thematic and formal—a man whose emotional and political disempowerment pushes him to the edge of his own life and of the narrative itself. This formal marginalisation aligns with the theoretical framing of postcolonial peripherality, in which characters such as Masud are denied agency both within society and within the narrative that depicts them.

Gravel Heart thus depicts a man who comes undone due to multiple traumas: political impotence, economic disempowerment and domestic emasculation. His silence is thus a commentary on the failure of postcolonialism to deliver the promises of dignity and restoration of pride in themselves for its male citizens, sinking them further into structures of degradation and exploitation. The failure is not only in being able to provide for the family, but also to protect the family, resulting in trauma that translates into delusion and grief. Thus, postcolonial conditions have created a nation of grieving men, silenced by the codes of masculinity from voicing their pain.

At the end of the novel, as Masud recounts the events that led to his exclusion, Salim begins to understand and reconstruct his picture of his father. However, this moment of revelation almost comes too late, as the

father passes away a few days afterwards. Gurnah's narrative timing suggests that silence functions as a temporal structure, delaying understanding until reconciliation becomes impossible, thereby exposing the irreversible cost of suppressed communication. The enduring legacies of postcolonial masculinities remain structurally imposed but intimately lived. Masud's death, almost immediately after he is given voice, underlines the tragic outcome of silence: voice is only given when transformation is no longer possible. Masud's revelation can no longer impact any outcome. Salim is not allowed to repair his relationship with his father. In this way, silence is destructive – preventing any form of repair and revealing how postcolonial masculinities are shaped by inherited silences that fracture subsequent generations.

Masud's silence, however, cannot be read solely as passive withdrawal or psychological collapse. Although it emerges from political and domestic emasculation, it simultaneously functions as a limited form of resistance within a system that denies him the right to speak. By refusing participation in social scripts of masculine recovery or confrontation, Masud reclaims a fragile space of autonomy, choosing silence over further humiliation. In this sense, silence becomes both symptom and strategy—an ambivalent response that exposes the impossibility of agency within oppressive structures while simultaneously asserting a minimal form of self-preservation.

Silenced Femininity and Delusional Desire in *Paradise*

Paradise is centred on the journeys of Yusuf, tracing his path from early childhood, being pawned off to Uncle Aziz, to his eventual decision to join the German Schutztruppe at the end of the novel. The novel is set during a transitional period, from Arab dominance along the East African coast and the trade routes that extended into the interior to the establishment of German imperialism. Yusuf finds himself caught in a web of domestic subjugation, brutalities of colonial power, conflicting performances of masculinities and a longing for a different life, one of his choosing.

Yet this section will focus on a quieter yet equally haunting story of the Mistress. Gurnah weaves her into the periphery of the narrative, her voice muted and her presence silent, inviting speculation. The Mistress, Uncle

Aziz's first wife, remains a ghost-like figure, confined inside the house, rarely seen, and only allowing a few visitors.

The Mistress hides from people. She never goes out. The few women who visit are relatives or people she cannot turn away. She made me put those mirrors on the trees so that she could see the garden without going out (Gurnah 1994, p. 204).

Her complete seclusion, relying on mirrors to catch glimpses of the outside world, reflects not only her physical confinement but also her silencing: she is spoken of and about but not allowed to speak for herself. Within Swahili-Islamic cultural contexts, forms of seclusion, such as *purdah*, may also signify virtue, protection, or social status, thereby complicating a purely oppressive reading and revealing how religious practice and patriarchal control intersect in shaping women's spatial limitations (Gower et al. 1996; Haque 2020). Her story becomes a story of mirrors and reflections: she is seen only through others' perspectives and never fully in her own, in a fragmented and distorted way. This narrative fragmentation is precisely the kind of representational distortion Spivak critiques in her distinction between *Vertreten* and *Darstellen*. The Mistress speaks, but her voice is refracted through the speech of others – Khalil, Yusuf, Amina – rendering her own intentions inaccessible. She is what Spivak might call the subaltern within the house: centrally located in terms of space, yet narratively silenced. Her voice does not disrupt the story; it is absorbed into others' gossip and speculation. In this way, her identity is overwritten and, in actuality, underwritten, a product not of her speech but of others' interpretations of it.

While *Gravel Heart* explores the trauma of emasculation in the postcolonial setting, *Paradise's* inclusion of the Mistress shifts the lens to the quiet suffering of women whose stories are erased and who are systematically silenced through patriarchal and colonial structures. It depicts the gendered violence of invisibility, where the Mistress is trapped and traps herself within domestic walls because of her facial deformity. In this way, she becomes the female version of Masoud – silenced not only by society but also by her internalised shame:

“The Mistress is crazy,” Khalil said suddenly, and then laughed to hear Yusuf's small exclamation. [...] When the seyyid married her, many years ago, he became suddenly a rich man. But she's very

ugly. She has a sickness. For many years, doctors have come, learned hakim with long grey beards have read prayers for her, and mganga from over the hills have brought medicine, but it's no good. Even cow-doctors and camel-doctors have come. Her illness is like a wound in the heart. Not a wound from a human hand. Do you understand? Something bad has touched her. She hides from people" (Gurnah 1994, p. 37).

Khalil's description of the Mistress as crazy, ugly, something bad having touched her, illustrates the way the female body is objectified and their suffering mystified through superstition and rumours. As Synnott observes, "the body is both an individual creation, physically and phenomenologically, and a cultural product; it is personal and also state property" (Synnott 1993, p. 4). The Mistress's body, therefore, becomes a subject of both patriarchal scrutiny (women's bodies should not be flawed) and societal control (women's flaws should be hidden and contained).

Her facial mark, "a purple patch [that] stained the left side of her face... giving it an angry, lopsided look" (Gurnah 1994, p. 209), becomes a site of both personal pain and social rejection. She tells Yusuf, "To begin with it was only a mark, but as time passed it bit deeper and deeper until it reached her heart. The pain was so great that she could not bear to be with people, who only mock her disfigurement and laugh at her cries of anguish" (Gurnah 1994, p. 225). Having internalised the patriarchal ideals of beauty, the mark on her face becomes not only a physical wound, but an emotional and psychological one. She excludes herself because she has been socialised with the expectations of beauty, and, being disfigured, she finds herself unworthy:

The crazy old woman in the house did not surprise him at all. It was exactly as it would have been in the stories his mother used to tell him. In those stories, the craziness would have been because of love gone wrong, or bewitchment to steal inheritance, or unfulfilled revenge. Nothing could be done about the craziness until matters had been put right, until the curse had been lifted (Gurnah 1994, p. 38).

Yusuf's lack of surprise gives the insight that many women suffer the same fate as the Mistress, women who are silenced and marginalised because of love or a curse. His mother, having told him those stories, shows that marginalisation of women, such as the Mistress, is not exceptional. Still, it

is embedded in culture, and women have also accepted it and passed it on to their children.

Her ostracisation, however, is not only the result of her appearance. Within society, she is an aberration because she fails to perform her gender properly. Her rejection of submissiveness and passivity makes her a target of gossip and judgment. As Khalil narrates,

Nearly twelve years ago, the seyyid married the Mistress. [...] She was recently widowed and rich. [...] Even though she was no longer young, her wealth attracted men of family and ambition. For nearly a year, she rejected them all and began to get a reputation. You know how it is when women turn down proposals of marriage. There must be something wrong with the women. Some people said she was sick, or driven mad by her bereavement. There was the other talk that she was barren, and preferred women to men. The women who brought the proposals to the Mistress, and took back her answers to the families of the men, said that for someone so ugly, she gave herself too many airs (Gurnah 1994, p. 201).

Her marriage to Uncle Aziz defies social conventions. Rather than being courted, she takes the initiative and courts him with her wealth. As Dasi states,

She marries Aziz through her personal efforts to attract him with gifts after hearing of him through business gossip. In the Swahili culture on which the text is based, male/female roles are specific, structured along a gender binary continuum, and each category is expected to align with these prescriptions. Such activities as wooing and paying bride price are meant for men, so it is absurd for a woman to perform these roles (Dasi 2017, p. 117).

Her defiance of gender roles stigmatises her and adds to her exclusion. The rumours spread about her serve as mechanisms to discipline other women from doing the same thing. The threat of social castration hangs over those who invert gender norms. Yet her refusal to conform to expected gender roles also introduces a form of disruptive agency, suggesting that marginalisation emerges not solely from victimhood but also from acts that unsettle normative expectations. Like Masud in *Gravel Heart*, she is ostracised for failing to perform her gender in the right way. Her failure to

conform and the punishment that follows reveal how Gurnah constructs the periphery not as a distant edge but as a condition imposed upon those who transgress gender norms. Hauthal and Toivanen (2021) note that the periphery is often defined “by lack of vitality, exploitation, and oppression” (p. 292). In the *Mistress*, we see all three: a character drained of agency, held captive by both internalised shame and external judgment.

However, despite being confined and confining herself to the house, the *Mistress* puts up mirrors in the garden, a way of having access to the outside world, even if the view of the outside world is refracted. She can see but only indirectly. That way, she can see without being seen. In this way, Gurnah (1994) links her desire for connection with the outside world to the delusion that she can achieve it through Yusuf, whom she has seen in the mirrors. The mirrors may therefore be read not only as symbols of distortion but also as subtle strategies of engagement, allowing the *Mistress* to negotiate visibility on her own terms within imposed limitations:

That’s how she saw you. Every day you went to work in the garden, she watched you in her mirrors. You made her even more crazy than she already was. She said God sent you to her. To cure her (Gurnah 1994, p.204).

Her distorted view through the mirrors makes her see Yusuf as a redeemer, someone who can cure her. Just as her views to the outside are distorted, her beliefs in how to attain freedom from her confines become distorted. Her belief that God has sent Yusuf to cure her marks the collapse between reality and fantasy. Her desire is based on mirror reflections rather than reality:

At first she said that if you prayed over her she would be healed. Then she insisted that you would have to spit on her. The spirit of those God favours has powerful qualities, she said. One day she saw you holding a rose in the cup of your hand, and she said that if you held her face as you held that rose then her sickness would go away. [...] Now she has a new madness and it’s very dangerous. Dangerous for you. Listen, she says you are now a man and the way to cure her wound is to take her whole heart in your hands. Do you understand? I can’t utter what is in her mind, but I hope you understand the direction she’s heading (Gurnah 1994, p. 205).

As her delusion intensifies, the Mistress demands more intimate forms of contact. Yusuf praying for her or touching her wound are no longer enough. Being ostracised for so long with limited emotional connections, she yearns for a human touch, one denied to her by a society that considers her ugly and mad. She projects this longing onto Yusuf, justifying it by invoking his intimacy as having healing powers. As Dasi (2017) notes,

The age difference between them, to her, does not constitute a barrier as she overcomes it with the thought that Yusuf's love will cure both her physical and emotional illnesses. She believes, "One touch from the beautiful boy will cure this wound in [her] heart". She treats him with tenderness, love and passion in the hope that he will reciprocate her love (p. 118).

Her longing for Yusuf is seen as a threat to the male figures of the household, both Yusuf and Khalil, as well as Uncle Aziz, when he learns of it. Her affection runs counter to the emotional spectrum women are permitted to inhabit; her affections are neither maternal nor as a mistress. Instead, they are erotic and obsessive, breaching the boundaries of class and gender. She at once turns from a silently suffering woman to a figure of peril as she acts on her delusion about Yusuf:

Yusuf could not be sure what she wanted him to do, but he could not mistake the look of passion and longing on her face. She pressed the palms of her hands on her bosom and then rose to her feet. When she put her hand on his shoulder, he shivered. He began to retreat, and she followed. He turned to flee, but she clutched his shirt from behind and felt it tear in her hands. As he ran out of the room, he heard her screams of agony but did not look back or hesitate (Gurnah 1994, p. 236).

Her reaction mirrors what Gilman in 1982 refers to as the "rest cure," a forced rest that women were subjugated to for their nerves, which led to their psychological breakdown. The Mistress is confined to the world due to her physical appearance and her failure to perform femininity properly. This confinement, with the long absences of Uncle Aziz, deepens her delusion of a way out. At the same time, her daring to act, to speak, to express what she feels is quickly repressed and dismissed as madness:

You stupid, stupid...Shall I tell you what she is saying? That you attacked her and tore her clothes like an animal, after she had treated you with such kindness. She wants me to fetch people from the town so that she can make this accusation to witnesses. They will beat you and spit on you...and who knows what else (Gurnah 1994, p. 237).

When she fails to lure Yusuf into her trap, she turns to the only remaining script available to women: a cry of attempted rape, vilifying the man and his sexual desires. The lies she makes up against Yusuf are her last grasp at finding meaning in a world that has long considered her an outcast.

The book concludes without giving the Mistress redemption. She recedes once more into silence, unspoken and her story unfinished. Her brief visibility in the novel is like the reflections through her mirrors: fragmented and never whole. And yet, her fragmentation is not accidental. It is, as Spivak and Hauthal & Toivanen suggest, the formal expression of structural silencing. The Mistress embodies the subaltern who cannot speak—not because she lacks a voice, but because her words are always already disfigured, misread, or dismissed. Thus, *Paradise* thematises the silenced women, silenced by colonial structures and patriarchy, whose presence is disrupted and fractured by the mirrors of culture and gender. Like Masud, the Mistress also stands at the edge of the narrative. She, too, is a victim of a system that punishes difference, silences pain and equates worth with conformity. Her retreat into mirrors mirrors Masud's retreat into silence. Both characters reveal the emotional toll of existing within structures that deny them space to feel, speak, or be. Thus, *Paradise* is not just a colonial allegory but a gendered meditation on what it means to be erased. The Mistress is not simply mad—she is broken by years of loneliness, by the cruelty of societal standards, and by the loss of control over her own story.

Conclusion

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Gravel Heart* and *Paradise* offer a quiet yet devastating reflection on the impact of exclusion and the emotional and psychological toil of silence. Through Masud and the Mistress, who are both structurally marginalised and narratively muted, Gurnah explores how postcolonial subjects are rendered voiceless by political betrayal, economic fragility, internalised shame and patriarchal expectations. Their silence is thus not

simply the absence of speech but the result of sustained ideological, cultural, and structural erasure. Their stories are told at the edges of the plot, often through the voices of others. In this way, Gurnah draws attention to how narrative authority itself participates in marginalisation, forcing the reader to reflect on the unsettling fact that Masud and the Mistress are not marginal characters because they lack complexity or significance, but because they have been pushed to the periphery by intersecting social, political and economic dynamics.

Masud's silence is rooted in political betrayal and domestic emasculation. Once a man with a stable job and a family, he becomes a ghost-like presence, retreating into himself after losing both economic and symbolic power. The shame he carries is not just personal—it is historical, gendered, and structural. Gurnah does not offer him redemption or reintegration; his story is told only in fragments, long after his silence has already consumed him. Yet Masud's withdrawal is not entirely passive; his silence also functions as a response to emasculation, a limited form of agency within a context that denies him speech without further humiliation. Similarly, the Mistress in *Paradise* is confined to the domestic space, her face marked by physical disfigurement and her voice distorted through others' narration. Her desire, her anger, her madness—all are refracted through Yusuf, Khalil, and Amina. What she says is always doubted, mediated, or mistranslated. Her moments of defiance—rejecting suitors, initiating marriage, installing mirrors—briefly unsettle patriarchal expectations, even as they ultimately lead to deeper exclusion.

This article demonstrates that Gurnah does not simply describe exclusion but also enacts it formally through narrative structure. The marginalisation of Masud and the Mistress is built into the form of the novel. As Hauthal and Toivanen (2021) suggest, peripherality is not merely geographical or social—it is also narrative. It “defines the construction of the identity of non-hegemonic cultural, economic, and geopolitical spaces” (p. 292). Masud and the Mistress inhabit this narrative periphery. They are not just victims of their circumstances, but figures through whom Gurnah exposes how silence is structurally produced and maintained within postcolonial storytelling. Ultimately, *Gravel Heart* and *Paradise* do not redeem these characters or restore their voices. Instead, Gurnah allows their silence to linger, refusing narrative closure and compelling readers to remain with the discomfort of unresolved exclusion. Their silence continues to haunt the

reader and becomes the very space through which Gurnah critiques postcolonial state power, patriarchal gender norms, and class hierarchies that sustain marginality while rendering its subjects unheard. In doing so, the novels suggest that the most devastating effects of exclusion lie not only in oppression itself, but in the delayed, distorted, or denied possibility of being heard at all.

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